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Myth 14: Waiting for Santa Claus

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Just as in 1982, when this myth was first addressed in *Gifted Child Quarterly*, many districts all over the country are still waiting for Santa Claus to arrive with a sleigh full of presents. Unfortunately, Santa and his presents in the form of mandates to identify and serve, funding, teachers licensed in gifted education, materials, equipment, and an administrator with advanced work in gifted education to oversee the services rarely arrive. The notion that services cannot be provided without all these accoutrements is false, but the belief that it is true keeps districts from even attempting to provide services that do not require such provisions.

When a school district is beginning to plan for services for its gifted students, a common first step is a visit to a neighboring district with clearly articulated, well-funded, highly effective services for gifted students. The visiting district may be overwhelmed with the intricacies of the services, forgetting that these services took years to evolve through hard work, planning, and evaluation. The misconception from the visiting district is that without an “abundance of riches” they cannot serve gifted learners. Whereas trying to accommodate the needs of gifted learners does indeed take time, effort, and funding, there are a number of actions that a district can undertake without an extensive budget. Of prime consideration is the issue of buy-in from multiple stakeholders ranging from district-level administrators to parents. As Curl stated in 1982, “The bottom line is commitment from district personnel and the community and not necessarily the number of dollars available” (p. 47).

This commitment from district and community personnel is vital and lack thereof has resulted in many programs becoming obsolete due to federal legislation enacted since 1982—the inclusion movement and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Although inclusion is not a new topic, the latest legal addition to inclusion, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997, pushed inclusion to the forefront. The

1997 Amendment stressed the need for all educators to share in the responsibility for services provided to all students, including those with disabilities (Williams & Katsiyannis, 1998). Almost immediately, serving gifted students outside the regular classroom was suspended in many areas as “inclusion” came to be interpreted by superintendents and other district personnel as placing all children, regardless of other needs, in the regular classroom. Because gifted services were often viewed as “add-ons” rather than as integral parts of the total programming of the school, administrators found it easy to disband them to recover costs for other budget items. NCLB requires states to develop assessments in basic skills to be given to all students in certain grades if those states are to receive federal funding for schools. A primary criticism from the field of gifted education asserts that gifted students often have already mastered basic skills and must languish in classrooms waiting for others rather than receiving curriculum commensurate with their abilities. Many districts encourage teachers to “teach to the test,” dwelling only on basic knowledge and skills in subjects to be tested, generally mathematics and language arts. Thus, even if Santa *did* arrive, he may not be allowed to come down the chimney.

Clearly, for gifted services to be sustained over time, both the district and the community must have a solid understanding of the nature and needs of gifted students. This can be accomplished by conducting a needs assessment, bringing in experts knowledgeable about the field of gifted education, and attending to the academic, social, and emotional needs of these students. Although gifted services cannot generally be maintained over time with no funding, there are several options for low-cost services. Of prime importance

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is a qualified person with knowledge and background in gifted education to oversee the services. With many online programs leading to licensure or endorsement in gifted education, there is no longer the need to leave home to complete advanced work. Second, there are service options that do not require hiring extra teachers (but do require funds for preparing classroom teachers). These include differentiation in the regular classroom (Tomlinson, 2003) and cluster grouping (Gentry & Mann, 2008, Winebrenner & Devlin, 2001). Other strategies and service options such as acceleration, independent study, dual credit classes, mentorships, and internships can be provided at little or no cost to the school district.

Should Santa arrive, however, districts must beware of presents wrapped in designer paper with frilly bows if the gift inside is simply old and worn out. The outside wrappings, no matter how glitzy, cannot enhance the value of the gift. If we add a catchy name, such as EAGER, EXCEL, PEP, or LEAP, but only provide services outside the regular school day, we might as well not have bothered to open the gift. Even if the gift is exactly what was requested, there must be oversight to determine if the gift is used appropriately or managed well. The price tag on the program is not what makes the program exemplary; instead, it is the administration, the oversight, the clear articulation of identification of and services to gifted learners, the communication among all stakeholders, and the alignment of gifted services with general education.

School districts are not the only ones waiting for Santa Claus to arrive. Research in the field of gifted education also suffers when individuals only undertake studies that are expensive and fully funded. The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented is funded under the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act as are those individuals conducting research through smaller Priority 1 and 2 Javits grants. There are a number of centers associated with colleges and universities throughout the country that also provide opportunities for research in the field of gifted education. Santa Claus has generally already arrived for these centers and programs.

Cutting-edge research from centers and the Javits funding is generally well publicized. As a result, those not associated with this funding may feel their research lacks importance or cannot be conducted due to insufficient funding. Lack of six- or seven-figure grants is not a sufficient reason to ignore the critical areas in our field where research is still lacking. Perhaps a good approach is to consider what projects we might design if funding were not an issue. From that vision, identify research that can be completed with little or no funding. If research is to assist with informing our practice, then we must continue with cutting-edge projects that provide new insights, whether or not Santa arrives. To do otherwise is to render ourselves stagnant as a field.

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